



Title Functional food

Agency TA-SWISS, Swiss Science and Technology Council/Technology Assessment

Birkenweg 61, CH-3003 Berne, Switzerland; Tel: +41 31 322 9966 Fax: +41 31 323 3659

Internet: <http://www.ta-swiss.ch>

Reference Full report: TA 37/ 2000 "Functional Food", 363 pages, in German. ISBN 3-908194-12-1.

Short version TA 37A / 2000 "Between the Pantry and the Pharmacy: Functional Food – A Grey Area", 10 pages in English (also available in German and French), ISBN 3-908194-13-X

Aim

The present level of knowledge concerning functional food is comprehensively investigated. The study addresses the basic scientific and technical aspects of functional food, the functionality and market potential of corresponding products, and the international and Swiss position with regard to legislation. The status of the current discussion related to functional food is systematically summarized. Recommendations for handling questions related to functional food products in Switzerland are proposed. The report should feed the public discussion concerning this new form of food with information which is as comprehensive and as balanced as possible.

Conclusions and results

- In general, functional food is perceived as processed food which not only feeds consumers, but promises additional benefits related to the preservation and improvement of physical well-being and a reduction in the risk of falling ill from nutrition-related diseases.
- At present, functional food products are mainly developed to prevent cardiovascular diseases and osteoporosis and to influence gastrointestinal health.
- Currently, the most important functional ingredients are pro-, pre- and synbiotics, antioxidants, secondary plant metabolites, structured lipids, polyunsaturated fatty acids, fat replacers and substitutes, bioactive peptides, fibers, vitamins, and minerals.
- It is assumed that functional food represents a long-term trend which offers interesting growth opportunities for multinational food-processing companies, small and medium-sized companies in the food industry, and ingredient suppliers.
- Although functional food can potentially contribute positively toward the health of individuals, the influence of functional food on public healthcare costs in the short and medium term is considered to be limited. Reasons for this assessment are the small market share of functional food and the current product range which only partly focuses on the most important nutrition-related diseases and population groups with nutritional deficiencies and malnutrition.

Recommendations

- Functional food should be embedded in a sensible way in a comprehensive plan for well-balanced nutrition.
- The public should be comprehensively informed about functional food and health-related nutrition.
- To remove the current uncertainty concerning regulation and practices for market approval and control of functional food, it is recommended that effective procedures be established to clarify definitional problems among the authorities responsible for controlling food and pharmaceuticals.
- The allowed health claims (which go beyond nutritional claims and refer to health-supporting effects) should be defined and should be indicated in a general way for defined groups of functional food.

Methods

The international (scientific) literature was extensively studied, and 40 experts have been interviewed in Switzerland. The individuals and institutions taken into consideration mainly include the foodstuffs industry, nutritional sciences, preventive medicine, administration, trade, representatives of consumer interests, and nutritional consultants. Furthermore, a questionnaire has been sent to 307 persons and institutions in Switzerland.

Further research/reviews required

It is recommended to support research activities aimed at improving the scientific basis for assessing the function, efficacy, and safety of functional food.

Written by Walter Grossenbacher-Mansuy, SWISS-TA, Switzerland